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# **Migrant Workers and Trade Unions – A Realistic Relationship?**

Ian Fitzgerald

Presentation at Thompsons Solicitors

Labour Party annual conference fringe meeting

‘Attracting migrant workers into the trade union movement’

22<sup>nd</sup> September 2008

# Migrant Workers and Trade Unions – A Realistic Relationship?

## Introduction:

Labour market has changed:

- Service sector growing (many migrants involved);
- Agency labour more prevalent (WRS over 335,000 registered with agencies);
- Informal sector significant.

Migration global with the city of Bradford recognising itself as a global city

# Migrant Workers and Trade Unions – A Realistic Relationship?

## A migrants tale:

“Unions are white men's organisations”

- BME communities either ignored or recruited and left to fend for themselves?
- Migrant agency workers regarded as undermining terms and conditions or too few attempts to recruit at unorganised workplaces;
- Migrants unaware of correct wages or employment laws. Threatened by employers. Abused by some in the community.

# Migrant Workers and Trade Unions – A Realistic Relationship?

## A trade unions tale:

- Significant moves from outright racism;
- New accession migration see beginnings of new Poles entering TU movement -
  - Unite (T&G section) developing small group of Polish organisers – over 1/3 organisers BME; other trade unions have Polish reps;
- Lack of resources to target difficult to reach migrant groups?

# Migrant Workers and Trade Unions – A Realistic Relationship?

## Closing thoughts:

- BME organisers and full-time officer links with communities vital to allow unions to breakdown barriers & gain trust;
- But is it that Poles and eastern Europeans are white and ‘like us’?
- How effective are unions sustaining migrant membership? Polish Southampton holding branch;
- How flexible are they in their recognition of migrant needs – period of membership before services provided , lack of bank accounts?

# Migrant Workers and Trade Unions – A Realistic Relationship?

## Closing thoughts:

- Migrant TRUST is vital here and can take a long time to gain – Ucatt example;
- Separate groups in the workforce is a reality –
  - but unions are continuing their vital anti-racist work > arguing that the only way to stop migrant workers undermining current wages and conditions is to bring them onto the going rates.